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AUTHOR Lucas, Tamara
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ABSTRACT

The difficult transitions of adolescence combined with the challenges of learning a new language and culture can be overwhelming for immigrant secondary school students. This Digest highlights three ways educators can help students through these critical transitions and provides brief descriptions of three programs that are working to facilitate these transitions. First, the digest highlights ways of providing immigrant students and their parents with access to information that will help them to integrate successfully into the U.S. school system. This includes intake or parent information centers, workshops and seminars, school documents and orientation materials translated into the home languages of the students, and structured relationships with school staff. The next section discusses programs that support English language and academic development, including newcomer schools, English-as-a-Second-Language programs, sheltered English content programs, bilingual education programs, and alternative schools. The third section focuses on promoting access to postsecondary education, and the last section provides program profiles of The International High School in Queens, New York; Advancement Via Individual Development (AVID); and Project Adelante. (JL)

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PROMOTING SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

FOR

IMMIGRANT ADOLESCENTS

ERIC DIGEST

BY TAMARA LUCAS

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Digest

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Promoting Secondary School Transitions for Immigrant Adolescents

Tamara Lucas, Montclair State University NJ

This Digest is drawn from information included in *Into, Through, and Beyond Secondary School: Critical Transitions for Immigrant Youth* (Lucas, in press), the first title in the Program in Immigrant Education's *Topics in Immigrant Education* series.

Immigrant students constitute an ever increasing proportion of the school-age population, particularly those enrolled at the secondary school level. For students at this level, the difficult transitions of adolescence combined with the challenge of learning to express thoughts, develop a personality, and master academic content in a language they are still learning can be overwhelming (Spenser & Dornbusch, 1990). The inability to communicate ideas and feelings confidently can result in confusion, frustration, anger, and alienation. In addition, immigrant students must balance the value systems of their native culture, ever present at home, with those of the dominant culture, which prevail at school.

This Digest highlights three ways educators can help immigrant secondary school students through these critical transitions and provides brief descriptions of three programs that are working to facilitate these transitions.

Provide Access to Information

Learning the rules and practices of a new school system is challenging for immigrant students and their parents, and they need information to become successfully integrated into the U.S. school system. This information can be provided in many ways.

- *Intake centers or parent information centers* are located at schools or district offices and are often staffed with bilingual professionals. These centers register, assess, and place students in programs and provide oral and written information to their parents in their native languages. Such centers may also convene ongoing parent meetings.
- *Workshops and seminars* inform families about school rules, procedures, grading, extra-curricular activities, and special support services; expectations regarding attendance, homework, and family involvement; and college preparation and career guidance.
- *School documents and orientation materials* should be translated into the home languages of immigrant students. However, because some students and their parents may not be literate in their native language, schools should not rely solely on written documents. In Prince George's County, Maryland, school staff have developed a video in several languages about school procedures, expectations, and opportunities, for parents to view while their children are being enrolled at the intake center.
- *Structured relationships with school staff* through teams, clusters, schools within schools, student buddies, and counselors are also key for providing information to immigrant students and helping them get involved in school activities.

Support English Language and Academic Development

At the secondary level, immigrant students must learn English, master academic content, and earn high school and college credits in

order to pursue challenging careers and higher education. Schools take a number of approaches to help students attain these goals.

- *Newcomer schools* are special schools for recent immigrant students (see Chang, 1990; Friedlander, 1991). A major purpose of these schools is to support the adjustment of recent immigrants into their new society and school. This includes, but is not limited to, English language development and, in some cases, continued native language development. In many newcomer schools, students attend classes for half a day and then a regular middle or high school for the other half; in others, students attend all day for 6 months before they are enrolled in mainstream schools.

- *English as a second language (ESL) programs* usually consist of a series of courses designed for students with varying levels of English proficiency—beginning, intermediate, and advanced. They may also include special courses for low literate students, students with limited prior schooling, and those who are beyond the advanced level but are not ready for mainstream classes. Students may take a combination of ESL, sheltered content, and mainstream classes, depending on English proficiency, native language literacy, and academic background.

- *Sheltered English content programs* teach challenging academic content (e.g., math, science, social studies) in English. Instructional materials, teacher presentations, and classroom interaction are adapted so that learners can understand them and participate. (See Short, 1991, for ways these adaptations can be made.) The quality and effectiveness of these programs depend on the ability of teachers to provide instruction in English that is accessible to English learners without oversimplifying the academic content.

- *Bilingual education programs* acknowledge and build upon students' ability to speak, read, and write in languages other than English. At the secondary level, these programs usually consist of content courses in the students' native languages, enabling them to study academic content at their appropriate grade level. Some programs emphasize continued development of the native language, but most are designed to promote the transition to English.

- *Alternative schools* are designed for students who are unable to take advantage of newcomer programs or special curricula in regular schools because of factors that affect their ability to attend and complete school, such as the need to work and support families. In these schools, students can begin studying in the late afternoon and take academic classes that grant graduation and college credits.

Promote Access to Postsecondary Education

Immigrant students face many obstacles in making the transition to higher education and need guidance to negotiate the system successfully. A number of programs provide basic information

about preparing for, selecting, and applying to colleges, and help students throughout the process. Academic support services such as tutoring, summer schools, weekend programs, and academies improve students' academic and English language skills. Linkages with higher education institutions, through mentoring by college or university students and college visits, can help students learn about and envision themselves attending a university.

Because education is more necessary than ever for success in today's workforce, all students should be encouraged to pursue higher education. However, whether or not students are immediately college bound, all of them need a secondary education that is academically challenging and develops the required knowledge and skills necessary for success in the labor market. Unfortunately, many English language learners are placed in vocational education classes that are not academically challenging. Effective pathways to the world of work include career exploration, career guidance, career academies, cooperative education, youth apprenticeship, school-based enterprises, entrepreneurship education, internships, youth service, service learning, and work-based mentoring.

Program Profiles

The International High School at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York is a 4-year comprehensive high school designed for limited English proficient students who have lived in the United States for less than 4 years. The school's mission is to enable all students "to develop the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural skills necessary for success in high school, college, and beyond" (International High School, n.d.). Designated as an alternative high school within the New York City school system, it is different from most newcomer schools because it is not temporary (students attend all 4 years) and does not segregate newcomers entirely. Because all of the students are recent immigrants, they are central, not peripheral, to the school. The school has been completely restructured to promote collaboration and develop relationships within the school community. Content is taught in 12 interdisciplinary clusters, each linking four subjects (math, science, social studies, and language arts) around a theme. Groups of approximately 75 students work together in a cluster with 4 to 8 staff members, with whom they stay for an entire trimester. Students can use their native languages socially and in class and can choose to develop them by taking courses. They have access to all of the college's facilities, can interact with college students, and can take college courses for credit. A career education program is built into 2 of the 12 interdisciplinary clusters, to ensure that students know how to make the transition beyond high school. All students go through an internship sequence during their tenure at the school.

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), initiated in San Diego, California, works to place under-represented students from linguistic and ethnic minority groups in rigorous academic classes while providing a system of support and advocacy, which includes explicit instruction in skills that are essential to academic success. It aims to prepare these students to perform well in high school and to pursue a college education. Students are enrolled in a course during the school day that teaches strategies for interpreting and analyzing texts, writing essays, taking tests, and approaching faculty for assistance. In addition, teachers and aides tutor students outside of class in academic subjects. School staff also provide extensive personal and social support by communicating with the parents, counseling students with personal problems, helping students through the college selection and application process, bringing

college and university representatives to the school, and arranging visits to college and university campuses.

Project Adelante was established at Kean College (New Jersey) to inspire Grade 6-12 Hispanic students learning English to work toward the long-term goals of high school graduation and college entry. Students are encouraged to remain in the program from the time they enter until they complete high school. Students attend a Saturday academy in the fall and spring semesters and a 5-week summer academy on the Kean College campus. The program includes academic instruction, career and personal counseling, peer tutoring, mentoring by Hispanic professionals, and family involvement. Transportation is provided for all students, and parents are encouraged to attend classes. The academic curriculum is thematically organized, based on a whole language approach, and is taught by teachers from the participating school districts. Three counselors are on the staff to teach classes and meet with students in individual and group counseling sessions throughout the summer, fall, and spring sessions. In addition, the counselors establish an important link with the parents by organizing meetings and activities to help them understand and encourage their children (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1994).

Conclusion

To enable immigrant students to make smooth transitions into, through, and beyond secondary school, our schools must commit to functioning as communities, building bridges to students' families and to other organizations outside the school, providing students with information about the broader U.S. culture as well as the culture of the school, and developing curricula and instruction that incorporate students' experiences, knowledge, and skills. The development of English language abilities, academic skills, and content knowledge, accompanied by support for native language development, can provide the foundation for the future success of immigrant students in secondary schools and beyond.

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